

Editorial

The Benton Harbour Plan

Distance education remains, primarily, a method taken up by individual students who study independently; they also study in isolation from other students—although new technology is changing the nature of that separation from others. New technology is also leading to a spread of the practice of “mixed-mode” classes, in which students pursue a distance learning program under supervision of a teacher in a classroom. This arrangement is particularly attractive to elementary and high school administrators as a way of providing courses in specialist fields for which numbers of students in a school are too few to support a resident instructor.

I recently came across a fascinating, little-known piece of history about the mixed mode and decided I would retell a bit of the story for the benefit of other people who enjoy history and for the encouragement many of us feel when we hear that a problem or challenge is not something others haven’t run into before us.

This particular story begins in the fall of 1922 in Benton Harbour, Michigan, when Mr. S. C. Mitchell was appointed principal of the local high school. Benton Harbour High School, situated in a working-class community, had about a thousand students. Mitchell felt that the curriculum was too heavily biased toward college preparatory subjects, and he decided that there should be more vocational subjects. This was not a popular notion in the educational culture of those days, and there was no hope of obtaining faculty to teach such subjects. Therefore, Mitchell approached one of the nation’s most respected distance education schools, the American School in Chicago. He enrolled a group of nine students in the school’s correspondence courses and undertook to supervise the students in his classroom. Success led to expansion, and by 1937 Mitchell had 304 pupils enrolled in thirty-eight different courses.

The practice became known as “supervised correspondence study” and spread around the country, so that by 1930 similar projects had been attempted in more than a hundred public high schools. In 1938 it was the subject of a report presented by Noffsinger (a very important historical figure in his own right) to the First International Conference on Correspondence Education. According to Noffsinger (1938),

it was soon demonstrated that supervised correspondence study was not only a valuable method for enriching the curriculum with vocational subjects, as Mitchell had proven at Benton Harbour, but that it was also most valuable in offering a solution to at least three other problems in the secondary field, namely (1) the isolated student, (2) the enriching of the curriculum in the small one-, two- and three-teacher high schools which numerically constitute one-half of all public high schools in the United States, and (3) vocational guidance. (85)

A significant contribution to the spread of the idea of supervised correspondence study occurred in 1929, when it was adopted by the University of Nebraska as the basis of an experimental high school under the direction of Knute Broady, another giant pioneer of distance education. Two years later, Broady received a \$5,000 grant from the Carnegie Foundation for the development of this activity. In 1933, the U.S. Department of Education issued a special bulletin on the subject called *High School Instruction by Mail*, and the next year the first conference on supervised correspondence study was held in Cleveland, Ohio.

No fewer than five different aspects of this fascinating story strike me as resonating with our current experiences.

First, the method itself: Insert the online medium of communication, and what Noffsinger (1938) wrote over a half century ago sounds not unlike what many teachers are trying today:

Two class periods are spent by each pupil per day under supervision in study and preparation of the lesson assignments, which, when completed are turned over to the supervisor in charge of forwarding to the correspondence center for review, correction, and additional instruction if necessary. (84)

How did faculty learn what they had to do? It doesn't look as if they had much more formal training than they do today, though at least one training program was established. According to Noffsinger (1938), beginning in 1934

and during each subsequent summer term thereafter Teachers' College Columbia University has been offering a course on the technique of supervised correspondence study. The enrollment in these classes during the past five years has been generous in number and undoubtedly has done much to promote the idea of the value in this type of instruction as well as to familiarize a large number of school executives with the techniques employed. (88)

Were people concerned about costs? Indeed, for

during the period of the recent depression, when all costs were being carefully scrutinized, ... correspondence courses were costing \$7.01 per pupil per year, as compared by the classroom method, to a cost of \$23.95 for agriculture, \$17.31 for home economics, \$14.60 for physical science, and \$10.05 for commercial subjects. (Noffsinger 1938, 84)

What about completion rates? According to Mr. L. D. Smith, guidance instructor at the Senior High School in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania,

about sixty-eight percent of our students finish the courses they start. It is only rarely that a student changes courses many times and then only under the sanction of his supervising instructor. Nevertheless the student is conscious of the fact that such changes can be made and will be made until a field is found in which there is success. (Noffsinger 1938, 86)

Is the current idea of public-private partnerships really such an innovation? Not according to Noffsinger (1938):

This story would not be complete without mentioning the cooperation of the American School, Chicago, Illinois, and the International Correspondence Schools, Scranton, Pennsylvania, two private correspondence schools that contributed through their officials most generously from their successful experience in the correspondence field which extended over more than forty years and whose enrollments have exceeded the five-million mark. Their great variety of vocational courses which literally cost millions of dollars to develop and produce, and which are universally recognized for their high quality and pedagogical soundness, have always been available to this movement on a cost basis. (88)

And finally, how did established institutions of higher education respond to innovation in the past? We can judge from the contents of a letter written by one director of secondary education who described what happened when it was proposed to introduce the supervised correspondence study method in his state. Apparently, the accrediting body (the Southern Association) set up a committee to check out the plan and particularly to vet the potential private partner. Members of this committee became convinced that a quality program was possible “in spite of the fact that previously the majority of the committee had been thoroughly skeptical of such a plan” (Noffsinger 1938, 87). The plan was never realized, however:

Before the Committee had a chance to present its report, very decided objections were made by institutions interested in developing their own extension courses. The plan was killed, not by high school men but by representatives of higher institutions. It was not given fair consideration. (87)

Nevertheless, supervised correspondence study at high school and elementary levels has, in fact, survived to our own time. Over the years, correspondence by mail has been the main communication device, but satellite-delivered video programming has also been used, particularly under the auspices of the Star Schools projects, as has been reported in previous issues of this journal. Today supervised correspondence study is turning to the application of Internet communications, opening new opportunities for the curriculum as well as for exciting interactions among students around the world. At elementary and high school levels, the University of Nebraska remains the leader in this part of the field, a testimony to the strong foundations laid by Broady and his colleagues as well as to the pedagogical soundness of the Benton Harbour concept.

According to Mitchell,

What we sought at Benton Harbour was to find a method of training that could be given under the supervision of our regular teaching staff without breaking the social contacts of the school group, that would be flexible enough to meet every need, not too expensive for our resources, and of a grade we could accept toward graduation. (Noffsinger 1938, 84)

Written nearly three-quarters of a century ago, that still sounds like a pretty good model for a high school distance education program, or indeed many other distance education programs. Don't you agree?

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Reference

Noffsinger, J. S. 1938. The story of the Benton Harbour plan. Paper presented at the First International Conference on Correspondence Education, August, Victoria, B.C., Canada. The Department of Education.